DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 242 826 UD 023 482

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TITLE Illiteracy in the Hispanic Community. Statement of Francisco Garza, Legislative Director, National Council of La Raza, Before the Subcommittee on Post Secondary Education of the House Education and Labor Committee.
INSTITUTION National Council of La Raza, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 2 Dec 82
NOTE 8p.; Presented on behalf of the National Council of La Raza and the Hispanic Higher Education Coalition.
PUB TYPE Legal/Legislative/Regulatory Materials (090)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Literacy; Definitions; Elementary Secondary Education; English (Second Language); *Functional Literacy; *Hispanic Americans; *Illiteracy; Language Proficiency; *Spanish Speaking

ABSTRACT

Substantial numbers of Hispanic Americans cannot complete school or compete effectively for jobs because of less than adequate literacy in English. Before anything can be done about this, our definitions of literacy and illiteracy need to be reworked. The conventional definition of literacy as the completion of fifth grade ignores the changing demands of life in the United States, and the tremendous variation among types of illiterates in the population in general and the Hispanic community in particular. Such a simplistic definition misclassifies those who may have left school but are still literate, those who managed to complete school but are functionally illiterate, and those who are literate in another language but not yet proficient in English (these last are not illiterate; they are monolingual and have different needs). Some Hispanic "illiterates" have never become literate or developed strong language skills in either language. Others with limited ability to read and write effectively in English are products of our own public schools which have, in effect, perpetuated their illiteracy by concentrating on oral English skills and neglecting comprehension, reading, and writing. Clearly, adequate programs to combat illiteracy cannot be designed until we analyze exactly what it is we are trying to deal with. (CMG)

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ED242826

APR -2 1984

ILLITERACY IN THE HISPANIC COMMUNITY

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UD023482

The National Council of La Raza and the Hispanic Higher Education Coalition appreciate the invitation to deliver testimony on the problem of illiteracy in the Hispanic community. The high rate of illiteracy among Hispanics is a great concern to Hispanic organizations concerned with equal educational opportunity.

Substantial numbers of Hispanic Americans are unable to complete school or effectively compete for jobs because of less than adequate literacy in English. Illiteracy is a problem which is difficult to quantify and deal with because of insufficient data and the poor definitions of illiteracy which are routinely employed.

Illiteracy is conventionally defined as the failure to complete more than five years of elementary school. Using that criteria, the Department of Education has estimated that approximately one in five adults is functionally illiterate. When school completion rates are used to define illiteracy, Hispanics are much more likely than Whites to be classified as functionally illiterate because the school retention and completion rates are so much lower for Hispanics than for Whites.

According to the 1980 Current Population Survey report on educational attainment in the United States, 17.8 percent of Hispanics 25 years old and over has completed less than five years of elementary school as compared to 2.89 percent of Whites. Non-metro Hispanics are especially likely to be classified as illiterate (26 percent as compared to 3 percent for non-metro Whites). According to the 1979 CPS report "Persons of Spanish Origin in the United States," Mexican Americans have the highest rates of functional illiteracy of all Hispanics (23.1 percent), followed by Puerto Ricans (15 percent), Cubans (9.3 percent) and other Hispanics (5.9 percent).

Even when a broader definition of illiteracy is employed, Hispanics do not fare well. The Adult Performance Level Project at the University of Texas at Austin which defined literacy on such practical criteria as ability to interpret a bus schedule, understand a printed explanation of finance charges or address a letter so that it would reach its destination, found that fully 56 percent of Hispanics in this country could be classified as functionally illiterate, as compared to 47 percent of Blacks and 16 percent of Whites.

Language background is strongly related to school completion, and literacy. This is especially true for Hispanics. Hispanics with a mono-English background are almost as likely as Whites to complete high school; however, Hispanics with a non-English language background, whether or not they usually speak Spanish, are more likely than Whites to drop out of school, according to the 1976 Survey of Income and Education.

It is significant that a non-English language background, independent of whether or not individuals usually speak English, influences a student's performance in school. This indicates that definitions of English proficiency which concentrate solely on <u>speaking</u> ability are inadequate to truly measure the degree of proficiency a student has in English. A definition of English proficiency which is based on ability to speak, read, write and understand English is more comprehensive, since it is based on a variety of skills, including those associated with literacy.

It is unfortunate that many studies and surveys purporting to count the number of limited English proficient children rely solely on oral language capabilities. An additional problem is that in most cases it is a third party who reports on the child's proficiency. The 1980 Census used a measure of this type. The Children's English and Services Study discovered in 1978 that third party reports of a child's English <u>speaking</u> ability did not necessarily reflect a child's proficiency in English. Fully 72 percent of

children identified as speaking very well or well, were in fact, limited in English proficiency when given a comprehensive test for proficiency. Thus, merely measuring English speaking skills does not measure full English proficiency and ignores the question of literacy.

Educational programs which focus only on producing children who speak English do not promote full English proficiency and may in part be responsible for the high rates of functional illiteracy in the Hispanic community. Recent research shows that there is an automatic oral language shift which occurs for monolingual Spanish speakers during elementary school. Unless children are living in highly isolated or segregated areas, children will become predominantly English speaking and lose most of their ability to speak Spanish. This occurs even where there are no special language programs in schools. Language retention for Hispanic children in integrated areas is not substantially greater than for any other group of language minority children. The fact that Hispanics are the most segregated group of children within the public schools may be responsible for slowing down that shift, but the <u>oral</u> language shift does occur.

There is not necessarily, however, a corresponding shift in written language. What we do know about literacy is that persons who are literate and have strong language skills in their native language are more likely to become fully proficient and literate in English. There is a strong correlation between the degree of proficiency in the native language and the second language. Therefore, when children do not have a chance to develop strong skills in their first language their chances for becoming fully proficient in their second language are diminished. For many children, the absence of this opportunity has resulted in illiteracy in both languages. If we want Hispanic children to become fully literate in English, we have to teach reading and writing. It will not automatically "happen."

Our entire definition of illiteracy needs to be reworked. It is inadequate for the general population and does not come close to describing the educational condition of Hispanics in the United States. To define literacy as simply the completion of the fifth grade ignores the changing demands of life in the United States and the tremendous variation among types of "illiterates". Such a simplistic definition misclassifies those who may have left school but are still literate, those who managed to complete school but are functionally illiterate and those who are literate in another language but not yet proficient in English. This last group of individuals are not illiterate, they are simply monolingual and they have different needs. Programs designed to address illiteracy must respond to the specific needs of different types of "illiterates". For some "illiterates" there are a number of other unmet needs that are basic for survival. Literacy alone cannot erase the poverty and "marginalization" which are a part of the lives of many illiterates. Our present definition of literacy is both out-moded from a technological perspective and inadequate to help us design programs to address the needs of a variety of different types of illiterates.

Many of the language barriers faced by Hispanics are not the same as those faced by illiterate monolingual English speakers. As previously mentioned, many Hispanics are literate in Spanish but are limited in their English proficiency. Other Hispanics have never had the opportunity to develop literacy or strong language skills in either language. This group faces all the problems of monolingual English illiterates, plus the added problems of language interference and limited proficiency in English. Other Hispanics with limited ability to read and write effectively in English are products of our own public schools which have concentrated mainly on <u>oral</u> English skills and have neglected to teach comprehension, reading or writing. This last group of children have been provided with an inadequately designed

education and their illiteracy has, in fact, been created by the schools.

The outcomes of inadequate levels of English literacy and proficiency are profound. Because such a high proportion of Hispanics over 25 years old are "functionally illiterate," they cannot provide their children with the early home reading experiences which have been closely linked with children's later ability to read. Illiteracy and lack of full proficiency in English influence a student's ability to keep up with his or her classmates, and many Hispanics do, in fact, fall behind with each year they remain in school. Being over-age and behind grade level contributes to the disproportionately high rate of Hispanic dropouts. These low levels of education decrease the earning power of youth and adults. The Department of Education estimates that Americans who have not completed high school earn only two-thirds the salary of those with high school diplomas. In addition to the low levels of formal schooling, a recent report by the National Commission for Employment Policy found that lack of full proficiency in English was perhaps the most important barrier for Hispanics in the labor market. Limited literacy also affects an individual's ability to enter the armed services, since recruits with less than a fifth grade reading ability are currently not accepted. In summary, inadequate reading skills hamper Hispanics in all areas of life.

Any recommendations for addressing the problem of illiteracy in the Hispanic community must begin with the call for further analysis. We simply do not know enough about the unique situation of Hispanics. The whole issue of literacy and proficiency in a second language needs more attention. As previously mentioned, we need to devise a more comprehensive and appropriate definition of illiteracy if we are to adequately describe the situation of Hispanic Americans. Any programs created to educate Hispanics with non-English language backgrounds must be designed to help children become fully proficient in the English language -- that is, not merely

English speaking, but fully literate as well. Finally, community-based organizations have an important contribution to make in combating the problem of illiteracy and, especially for out-of-school youth and adults, are perhaps the most effective providers of literacy programs.